

“When my insides are on the outside” a sermon preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 16 May 2021 by Rev. Malcolm Gordon

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

For the astute among you, you will have noticed that we missed some verses out today in our reading from Acts. This was not a decision that was made locally, this decision goes all the way to the top – to the Revised Common Lectionary. There are some verses they don't want you to hear. In fact, it may be that these are verse that you don't want to hear either, and any of you familiar with the passage may be starting to feel squeamish.

As the story stands, we have this rather grown up account about Jesus' disciples choosing a replacement for Judas, who had gone over to the dark side. But the verses that have been left out change that from a rather grown up story, into something crossed between a Captain Underpants novel and a nasty chainsaw accident.

Because these are the verses we were instructed by the wise folk at the Revised Common Lectionary to leave out. They explain what happened to Judas, and why he won't be joining the disciples any more. Here goes:

(Now Judas acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. 19 This became known to all the residents of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their language Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.)

Now this is Knox Church, it's a beautiful place, with a long history and ongoing legacy of wonderful choral music. And the people here are thoughtful, cultured and refined, so you'll be familiar with the rich tradition of Christian art work that have reflected on Scriptural passages. It may surprise you then to know, that there are virtually no artworks exploring this passage. None of the grand masters have used it as one of their studies. Rembrandt or Caravaggio have not leave us with a collection of charcoal sketches. So, in lieu of these visual depictions, I asked my son Sam, aged 10, if he could fill in this lamentable gap in the churches visual library. And so he did. And here is his piece, which he entitled 'The Explosion of Judas.'

So why did the Revised Common Lectionary leave Judas and his intestines out of today's reading? And why have I decided to include them? Well, I think they left them out because it's gross, icky, unsavoury and unseemly. And I probably included them because I'm a troublemaker.

However, these are really only superficial answers. If something is in the Bible, we can't just leave it out because it makes us squeamish. Can we?

I have entitled today's message, 'When my insides are on my outside.' Because I think what we have done to poor old Judas is something we have often done to one another, and even done to ourselves.

What I mean is that we tend to leave the messy parts of the story out.

Many of you may have seen the Netflix special *Nanette*, which is a comedy performance by Hannah Gadsby. In the first half of the show she tells a series of funny stories. In the second half of the show she tells the parts of those stories that she left out, revealing how what had seemed hilarious to us, was only so funny because she edited out the violent stuff, the dark stuff, the hurtful bits. You should watch it if you haven't. And in doing this show *Nannette*, Hannah Gadsby is says, 'I can't just tell the funny bit anymore' or 'I can't take a story that's actually full of complexity and heartache, and strain it all out so the rest of you can have a laugh.' She shapes the whole show as her farewell to comedy.

Like pre-*Nannette* Hannah Gadsby, like the Revised Common Lectionary team at Christian HQ – we are quite good at leaving out the messy bits. But there's a danger when we do that. It's a danger that Mr Fussy encounters. Are any of you familiar with the Mr Men and Little Miss stories? One of my favourites is the story of Mr Fussy. He gets upset one day because his marmalade has 'bits' in it. So he spends the whole day separating the marmalade from the bits, or, if you prefer, the bits from the marmalade. But the problem is, that marmalade has bits in it. The bits are the marmalade, and the marmalade is the bits. I know – pretty deep for a Sunday morning. But I think what Mr Fussy wants us to know is that when we leave the messy stuff out, we may end up losing something vital to our own story. Maybe there's a part of our story that can't be told without the messy parts.

You see, we do this in whole lots of ways. Let's conduct a short, scientific experiment. I'm going to ask you all how you are, and then you're all going to tell me how you are. Now don't overthink this, otherwise you'll break the science. So, here's the first part of the experiment. I say, 'How are you?' and you say, 'fine.' Now, the second part of the experiment goes like this: how many of you, who just said you were 'fine' are not actually fine? If that's you, then blink at me 3 times. And, here's the last part of the experiment: if you said you are fine, and did not blink at me, but are still actually not fine, avoid eye contact with me now. I knew it.

Now, of course, I am not here this morning to tell you that you ought to stop telling people that you are fine when you aren't. Because most of the people who ask you how you're going, don't actually want to know how you're going. And they haven't the time, and they don't know you well enough for you to talk to them about it. So I mean this sincerely, when the person at the supermarket asks you how you are, you say 'fine' ok? That's actually not the problem. The problem is not us saying 'fine' to people we don't know. It's not us leaving the messy stuff out of sight with strangers. The problem is when we say that we are 'fine' to the people we do know well. It's when we keep the mess out of sight around our friends, around our families, around people who are committed to us in meaningful ways. It's a problem when no one knows we aren't fine.

Someone once said if we can't talk about it, we can't be healed. If we can't feel it, and let people know we are feeling it, it can't be fixed. The trick is knowing who we can trust with our mess.

So we started out hearing a story this morning that left out the messy stuff. But that story in turn is about a guy who couldn't cope with his messy stuff. Judas, the guy who led the soldiers to where Jesus was so they could arrest him, felt so awful, he went into a field and exploded. But he wasn't the only person in this story to fail. Peter, Jesus' best friend, pretended he didn't even know who Jesus was so he wouldn't get in trouble alongside him. All Jesus' other friends abandoned him. Judas messed up. No doubt. But he wasn't the only one. But he kept that mess to himself, and ultimately it was more than he could handle. Other people in this story messed up too, but they found a way to live with the ugly stuff in a way that Judas couldn't.

Now, the moral of the story is not: kids, make sure you talk to someone or you'll explode. But, then maybe, it is. You probably won't explode the way Sam has depicted Judas exploding – but it will still hurt. Metaphorical explosions still hurt.

The other thing that we need to remember, that Judas seems to have forgotten, is that we are not just our secret mess ups. We are not defined by the mistakes we make. Not when we are loved, not when we are in relationships of belonging and dignity. Judas is known throughout human history as a traitor, the one who betrayed Jesus. But the worst part is that seems to be how he saw himself as well. This one thing that he did, became so big that he couldn't see past it, couldn't see around it, couldn't see himself apart from it. In the end, it was all he was. It was like he'd been dealt a hand that he didn't want, and he couldn't do anything about it. 'Hey, why do I have to be Mr Betray the Son of God?' He was trapped in a glass case of emotion. And he could never get past it to anything else. But Peter the denier went on to become Peter the Apostle, and depending on your version of history, Peter the Pope. His story didn't end with his failure.

We need places, relationships, communities, churches, families where we can tell our stories with the messy bits left in. We need people we can say, 'I'm not fine' to. Because when we tell our stories with the messy parts left in, a couple of things happen, and they're a little bit wonderful. The first is we realise, perhaps not straight away, but eventually, that the messy part of our story, is actually only a part of our story. It's like being convinced there is a monster under our bed, and then we look under there, and there is a monster under our bed, but we realise that it's not as big as we thought it was. Still a monster, but not big enough to eat me. Still not great, but not as awful as I feared it might be.

The other thing that happens when we tell our story with the messy bits left in, with people where it's safe to do so, is we find out that we are loved, and that we are worth loving. The other reading that we heard today was from John 17, and in that, we overhear Jesus praying, and he is praying for you and he's praying for me. He's praying that we'll make it through and not get lost in the messes, the ones we make, or the ones that get made for us.

You see, the temptation is to convince people that I'm kind of a big deal. Someone who doesn't have messy stuff, so I say that I am 'fine' to the people closest to me, even when I'm not (and no one is fine all the time). And when I do that, then I'm pretending to be someone I'm not. And after a while, I get worried that if I stop pretending to have it all sorted, and not be my real insecure, uncertain, angry, or scared self, then all the people

who matter might decide they don't actually like me, the real me. Because I've been pretending, leaving out the messy stuff.

When I stop pretending, when I stop editing my own life, and let the walls down with the people where it's safe to do so, then I find out that I am loved – right down to my muddy boots and my stinky socks. And once I know that I am loved, the messy stuff doesn't seem so scary any more, because I'm not facing it alone.

Knowing Jesus is praying for me reminds me that I'm loved. We all need a place where we are more than our mistakes, and where the mess doesn't define who we are. It might be church. It might be choir. It might be the dining room at your home. It might be a group of friends, or a particular friend who gets you and accepts you. It might be your boyfriend or girlfriend or your spouse or partner. It might be your minister, or your mum or dad or your grandma or your twilight cricket teammate or your vasectomy support group. It doesn't matter where it is, we just all need a place where we can spill our guts, and be loved. Because all of us are loved.

Sing: You are blessed

Our restless feet will wander far from here
Our gentle hearts will ponder and not fear

We are blessed, we are loved, we belong
You are blessed, you are loved, you belong
I am blessed, I am loved, I belong
We belong

Our weary feet will stumble and fall
Our heavy hearts will crumble for all

Our homebound feet will follow the Way
Our gentle hearts will hold and hope and pray

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